Practical Training Session

A cross-cultural awareness workshop: language, communication and difference

By Victoria Odeniyi and Gillian Lazar, UK

This article reports on a one day cultural awareness workshop developed over four years by Victoria Odeniyi and Gillian Lazar, lecturers from English Language and Learning Support (ELLS) at Middlesex University in north London. ELLS provides workshops and tutorials in academic writing and English language development to both UK-based and international students studying in Britain. Depending on the student profile, ELLS lecturers draw on the methodologies of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and academic literacies in trying to meet the needs of each learner. ELLS is located within Learning Resources (LR), which includes library, computing and audio-visual services. Many students who seek out ELLS also frequently come into contact with LR staff members, who might be librarians, computing or audiovisual staff or other members of Learning Resources. Unlike ELLS lecturers, these staff members do not have any TESOL background, and may not be fully aware of the complex linguistic and cultural factors influencing students' communication and behaviour. Thus, the workshop was initially developed by peers (lecturers from ELLS) to be delivered to peers (staff in LR). While TESOL teacher training focuses primarily on training students to become ESL/EFL teachers, we believe that there may well be a role for TEFL trainers in training other staff in effective ways of communicating with language learners.

At times, conflict and misunderstanding had arisen between a minority of international students, and both administrative front office staff and staff originating from the various ethnic minority backgrounds prevalent in North London. This situation was complex as misunderstandings were:

1 **Linguistic** in nature
For example, it seemed that some misunderstanding occurred because of the diversity of learners' use of English on the one hand, and varieties of spoken English amongst some staff which deviated from 'Standard English.' Many of our administrative staff have native-speaker competency in English and are in many cases L1 speakers of English. However, their linguistic backgrounds are broad and originate from places as diverse as Russia, Turkey, Hong Kong, India and Poland. In addition, some staff members may also use a variety of London English. For example, they may use glottal stops in their spoken language (/bɛʔə/ for 'better' and /leɪʔə/ for 'later') which is often not understood by international students new to Britain.

2 Broadly **cultural**
For example, differences between what kinds of actions and ways of being are expected and viewed as normal by one cultural group, and those actions and behaviours which are seen as different, and, therefore, at times unacceptable. An example of this is time-keeping patterns explored later on in this article.

Aims of the training session

1 To raise awareness of cultural factors as a first step to managing differences which may be the cause of misunderstandings.

2 To highlight the role of culture in communication and the role of language in culture with an audience who may think of culture as high culture, or 'Culture'.

3 To help teaching and non-teaching staff from the University's Learning Resources department begin to develop some culturally competent strategies (Papadopolous, Tilki & Taylor 1998) for coping with the day to day reality of working within diverse places of work.

Factors influencing our approach to cross-cultural awareness training

In our experience, **information giving** as an approach to promoting cross-cultural awareness often consists of briefings or inductions that are didactic in nature. We have felt dissatisfied with this approach to training as it often adopts rigid categories as a way of describing cultural difference and makes broad generalisations about the behaviour and modes of thinking of different cultural groups (an etic perspective). For example, there is a belief among some people that Southern Europeans are more emotional than Northern Europeans. An etic categorisation might place all Italians in one category and all Norwegians in another whereas individuals within those counties vary in how they express emotions. Instead, we adopt an approach to cultural differences which can be described as emic as it attempts to explain differences in a more meaningful way without stereotyping.

We also make use of **critical incident analysis**. This form of training draws on social psychological theory to help explain the conflict that arises when an individual makes assumptions about an event or a person which differ from the meaning attached by the other person involved. It is used as a tool for awareness-raising, and has been developed by many for example, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) and Valdes (1995) in TEFL settings. Finally, we exploit **experiential learning** as an approach to promoting cross-cultural awareness. This draws on Kolb's (1984) learning cycle as way of reflecting on cultural experiences and encounters with others during/through classroom learning activities.

An example of a critical incident

The following example draws on elements from the approaches outlined above:

In an email from an undergraduate student we had not met, one of the trainers was referred to as *'My dear Victoria'*. Our initial response was that this form of address was over-familiar and therefore not appropriate. However, after some reflection we were unsure whether this informal register was:

1 the consequence of a desire to win greater leniency associated with a request for some work to be reviewed

2 a way in which speakers from the writer's speech community commonly refer to recipients of the same age and gender which had little to do with my professional role

3 an experimental use by the writer who was very unsure about the correct form of address to use with me.

This example of a critical incident can be discussed in groups with fruitful and sometimes surprising outcomes. We are careful to emphasise there are no 'right' answers or explanations, rather it is the talking through and making sense of the situation which can be helpful, thus promoting emic perspectives. We emphasise that, if as trainers and trainees, we begin with our own perspectives and sub-cultural membership we are more likely to be able to make sense of the actions and language of others appropriately.

An outline of the day

The day is divided into two very broadly:

1 reflecting on and discussing cultural experiences/encounters.

2 discussion of the many and varied linguistic and extra-linguistic reasons for cultural misunderstandings and some possible strategies for either preventing them, or for dealing with them more effectively should they arise.

What follows is an explanation of each of the day's activities in sequence.

1 Talking through the aims and rationale of the workshop

The aims and rationale tend to look something like this:

- To reflect on your own culture
- To develop an awareness of cultural differences which can cause misunderstandings
- To suggest a few linguistic strategies to help in the workplace
- To highlight the role of culture in language and communication

We allow time to go through each item explaining what it might mean for the group of individuals we are working with on the day. An important element of this discussion is the importance of mutual respect and confidentiality.

2 Preliminary ice-breaker – Getting to know the group

We use the following format:

- Talk to the person next to you for about 5 minutes.
- Find out a little bit about them and why they have come to today's session.
- Aim to pass on one memorable fact or anecdote about your partner to the rest of the group.

3 Culture brainstorming activity

We write *'culture'* on the board and then ask the group to jot down all the words, ideas and associations they have and are happy to share. They do this individually and then share their ideas in small groups. We ask the smaller groups to feedback briefly to the entire group as ideas are collated by the facilitators. This activity can take up to 30 minutes of the day.

The aim of the brainstorming activity is to determine the intercultural knowledge of the group. In our experience of working with university staff this was often extensive because many members identified that they were from a country other than the UK, were bilingual and/or bicultural, or through choice have spent extensive periods outside Britain.

4 What do we mean by culture?

Next, we present a slide entitled 'Culture':

Culture:

- Everyone has a cultural background
- Culture is traditionally associated with national boundaries but [sub] cultures cut across these
- Many people feel uncomfortable about asking others about their culture

But discussions about our culture can help dispel misconceptions. (Kelly & Meyers, 1992)

We acknowledge that definitions and understandings of the term culture are complex and contested. We use Kelly and Meyers' points above to illustrate our views of culture. These points provide a rationale for the Culture brainstorming activity (see Activity 3) and support our responses to and explanations of participants' contributions.

5 Cultural metaphors – the iceberg

We use the iceberg metaphor to talk about culture as it can be a useful way of highlighting the fact that many cultural perspectives are not visible. For example, what we see, hear and can explain is often above the surface, but we may hold other cultural values which remain below the surface.

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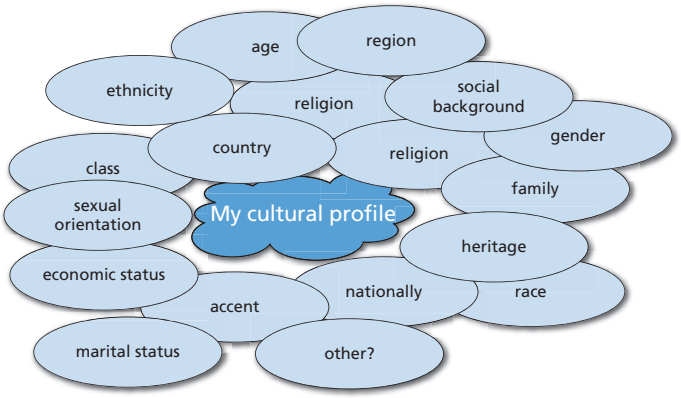
6 Reflecting on our own cultural background

Previous activities lead in to the next reflective exercise on cultural background where participants are invited to share as much or as little as they wish about their background, heritage, and idiolect as well as draw on themes and ideas discussed from the previous activities.

A – Two lead-in questions are:

- What is your cultural heritage?
- Which cultures form part of who you are?

B – We present the diagram below:



Next, we ask the group to spend some time reflecting on their own cultural background, particularly what is below the surface to continue with the iceberg metaphor. At this point we request that discussions remain confidential within the group as, at times, participants may divulge discomfort or difficulties surrounding particular students, staff members or perhaps their own backgrounds.

It helps if facilitators can give an example from their cultural background or membership of sub-culture as a model to begin with.

Example:

I was brought up in the north of England but have lived within 25 miles of Greater London for over 20 years. As a consequence I now say /baeth/ as easily as /ba:th/). I identify with both regions in the UK and use language to signal which sub-culture or region I feel closer to at a particular time.

This sense of overlapping cultures and speech communities is represented by the interlocking ovals above. For example, in past sessions some participants described themselves as being part of the North London community (region), but also as Greek Cypriot (heritage).

Themes which emerge as a result of discussions will of course vary and are therefore difficult to predict, but might include:

- the importance of the extended family

- obedience to authority

- a sense of belonging to a particular place

- how an individual feels they are viewed by others

This part of the day is particularly rich and it is worth noting at this point that verbalised reflections can point to a sense of being caught between cultures or sub-cultures. For example, someone may have lived close to where they were born for most of their life, but, at the same, time feel different to others around them because of family heritage. We emphasise that our sense of who we are changes across time and from one sub-culture to another throughout our lives. Thus, culture is dynamic rather than static.

7 Adjusting to a new environment

The previous reflective activity attempts to promote self-awareness while the next task draws attention to factors associated with adjusting or adapting to a new environment. The intention here is for participants to begin to consider the experiences of students new to their place of study as well as their own personal and professional experiences.

We provide the following on a slide or handout:

> 1 Think back over one of the following situations:
>
> A time when you travelled in a country with a language different from your own.
> *or*
> A time when you lived for a period in a country with a language different from your own.
>
> 2 Note down:
>
> a) two things that you found surprising about the experience
>
> b) two things that you liked
>
> c) two things that you found problematic or challenging.

Participants are given time to make notes individually. They are then invited to share experiences in pairs or small groups before a whole group discussion takes place.

This is an extremely fruitful part of the day. We draw on many of the cultures discussed in Activity 4 (What do we mean by culture?), emphasising that our sense of who we are changes as we encounter new people and new experiences.

It is at this point in the day that we begin to shift from participants' experiences and backgrounds and begin to draw parallels with how our students may be feeling. For example, during student induction, students might feel a heightened sense of frustration and impotence, when for example, a seemingly straightforward transaction such as borrowing a book from the library does not go smoothly.

At times, these periods of adjustments can be problematic and we focus on **culture shock** as an awareness-raising activity.

8 Culture shock

We aim to raise awareness of some of the difficulties which are associated with relocation, change and adjustment.

In 1960 Oberg suggested there were six aspects of culture shock which we feel still have relevance today:

1 **Strain** due to effort required to make necessary changes

2 **Sense of loss** and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, and possessions

3 **Rejections** *of* and *by* people from new culture

4 **Confusion** in role expectations, values, self-identity

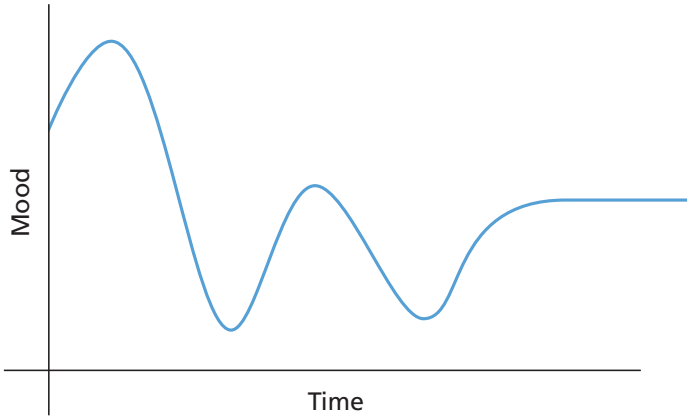
5 **Surprise anxiety, even disgust and indignation** after becoming aware of cultural difference

6 **Impotence** – not being able to cope

An example of an international student who may experience culture shock.
A student from China who has completed two years of a Media Studies degree in China and is now completing the third year of the degree in the UK.

An example of a local British student who may experience culture shock.
A mature student who has to make adjustments in terms of status and roles as he/she becomes a student rather than playing a more familiar role of team manager, where status and responsibility was taken for granted. Here the culture shock results from the move from a work/professional context into the university/educational context.

The W curve of cultural adjustment



(Adapted from Gullahorn & Gullahorn 1963 and Oberg 1960)

The W curve can be a useful way to make sense of how we feel as we begin to enter and get used to a new place of work or a new county. It helps to explain/illustrate individual differences and the fact that some people do not achieve full adjustment for many years. It also helps to emphasise that entry into a new culture does not necessarily consist of physical or linguistic change and that changes in mood are a normal part of adjustment, as, for instance, when starting a new teaching post.

9 Critical incidents in and around the working environment

This part of the day focuses on the analysis of authentic critical incidents and email correspondences. Rather than solidify preconceptions or stereotypes we point to the various linguistic, extra-linguistic and cultural explanations. One or two examples of these have been elaborated upon in Table One below. We also attempt to avoid stereotypes by purposefully removing cultural identity and gender as we do not wish to contribute to essentialist views or indeed create a dichotomised checklist of what certain nationalities and racial groups are like. Our intention is to avoid stereotyping at all costs.

Here are some samples of interaction between staff and students from the British university context which have caused misunderstanding, confusion and frustration:

Sample incident 1

A student approaches a librarian who is busy putting books away on the shelves. The student points to a booklist from a module handbook, and says:

'I need this book. Where is it?'

- How would you feel if a student approached you in the same way?
- How would you react to the student?

Sample incident 2

You have given a short talk in which you invite questions at the end. Nobody asks any questions at this point. After the session has ended, you get a cluster of students who continue to ask questions as you gather your belongings and try to leave the room. You feel annoyed as they ask useful questions which you feel the whole group may have benefited from.

- Why do some students seem to ask questions once a training session or class has ended?

Sample incident 3

A post-graduate student has booked an appointment with you for some additional help. The student is late. They do not apologise, shrug and simply state that they thought it was scheduled 15-minutes later than the time you recall you both agreed.

- How do you feel?
- Why didn't the student say 'sorry'?

Next, groups discuss responses to the incidents and questions. We discuss reasons why these incidents may have occurred which may be **cultural**, **individual** or specific to **circumstance** or teaching **context**.

There are many possibilities and we have summarised one or two reasons for each incident below:

Table One: Face to face incidents with suggested areas for discussion:

Critical incident	Suggested areas for of discussion
Incident one Demanding books	**People are not necessarily rude or 'bad' at English:** Patterns of pronunciation, intonation and stress (prosody) of many languages differ from English. Politeness formulae adopted by many L1 English speakers such as: *'I'm sorry to bother you but would you mind if…'* may be viewed as unnecessary in some cultures.
Incident two Not asking questions until session has finished	**Face saving strategies affect how we communicate with each other:** (i) Protecting ourselves: No-one wants to appear foolish or to lose face in front of a group. (ii) Protecting the face of others: Students with useful questions may not want to imply that the teacher has not explained well This 'face-work' varies according to the situation and according to cultural norms and values.
Incident three Turning up late, not saying sorry	**How late is late?** Rules around time-keeping often need to be learned. It is easy to make assumptions about cultural knowledge and assume that all students know and are acting upon the same cultural assumptions as university staff. Saying the actual word Sorry is culturally and linguistically specific.

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10 Analysing emails

Many large teaching institutions are increasingly using electronic communication, such as email, to communicate with staff and students. This is why we also use email correspondence as data for critical incident analyses. However, the examples we select to use depend on the interests of the group with whom we are working.

Email analysis activity

We hand-out participants a copy of the following:

> Imagine you received the following emails from students asking for help relating to an assignment they are working on.
>
> How would you feel?
>
> How would you respond?
>
> How might there be potential for misunderstanding?

Sample email extract one

Date sent: Fri, 20 Sep xxxx 12:43:02 +0100
From: xxxxxxxxxxxxx <xxxxx@mdx.ac.uk>
Subject: thank you for the essay work shop
To: v.odeniyi@mdx.ac.uk

Hi Vic,

Hello vic my name is xxxxx a first year bsc xxxx student. I am writing you to thank you very much for your Essay writing workshop for student who speak English as their first, second or additional language. The workshop will be helpful to me personally as it will help me to improve on my essay writing.

thanks

Sample email extract two

Date sent: Tues, 12 Nov xxxx 12:27:02 +0000
From: xxxxxxxxxxxxx <xxxxx@mdx.ac.uk>
Subject: help!
To: v.odeniyi@mdx.ac.uk

Hello,

I have a discussion and a report to write for ssc 2001 but I am nt 2 sure how to do it. Could you refer me to a book … that could help me structure'em. They both 1000 words.

Tanx

Xxxx

Table Two: Email incidents with suggested areas for discussion

Correspondence one Hi Vic,	**We are on first name terms** In British universities, it is common for many senior lecturers, professors and researchers to say, call me 'Jo' or 'Chris' even to first year students. This outward informality can mask an implicit hierarchy. Informality of address (Jo and not Dr. Smith) and dress code can lead to role and status confusion and a blurring of boundaries across registers. It can be easy for someone of a lower status within the institution to unwittingly cause surprise, or even offence, through an overly informal choice of address.
Correspondence two I am nt 2 sure how to do it.	**New forms of communication** Emails and texts have their own special language, or register, just like more formal forms of writing do. The language of emails are different to letters but also different to texts. We need to learn how much of this 'border crossing' is acceptable. Also, with new forms of e-communication, such as Twitter, we are faced with choices much more than we used to be. It can be easy to get it wrong.

11 Concluding the critical incident discussions

We underscore that these types of workplace misunderstandings can be due to individual difference, difficulties with language or perhaps misunderstanding what forms of social behaviour are acceptable in specific contexts. This can be made more challenging for newcomers because people do not always make explicit what they know. For instance, strategies for locating how to get hold of a book we cannot find (see Critical incident 1 above). Students need to know the appropriately polite linguistic form to use, as well as what is appropriate behaviour, i.e. to whom this question can be addressed.

12 Factors affecting cross-cultural misunderstandings activity

After discussion of a selection of the critical incidents we invite the group to reflect on and share some of their own experiences. We present the following table, and ask participants to discuss how they think these factors might cause misunderstandings, giving examples from their own experience, if possible:

Verbal factors	Non-verbal factors	Behavioural factors
• Prosody: sounds; stress & intonation • Accent • Conversational techniques • Suitable politeness formulae	• Proximity • Gestures • Touch • Eye contact	• Appropriate forms of address • Time

Are there any additional factors which might cause misunderstandings?

13 Strategies for avoiding cross-cultural misunderstandings

The next phase aims to support the development of some of the practical strategies listed below:

Some Strategies for Avoiding Cross-cultural Misunderstandings

1 Be aware that the student/colleague may not mean to seem rude/over-polite or aggressive/passive, etc. but may be behaving according to their own cultural norms of behaviour.

2 Avoid using complicated grammar in your answers to questions.

3 Avoid using very colloquial or idiomatic language.

4 Avoid assuming that the student will be familiar with the 'jargon' of the university.

For example, *User ID*.

5 Avoid assuming that the student will be familiar with British cultural institutions.

For example, Bonfire Night.

6 Try to break down long explanations into shorter ones.

7 If you are really stuck, ask the student to write down their request.

8 Smiling seems to be a cultural universal denoting good will, so... ☺?

We believe that the points above are simple, rather than simplistic and we have kept the handout deliberately short for reference at a later stage. It is notable that many of these strategies have an explicitly linguistic component (see, for example: 2, 3 & 4), and that communicating more clearly at a linguistic level can help speakers to avoid exacerbating cultural misunderstandings. This focus on the linguistic is often new to participants in cultural awareness workshops.

All the examples can be modified to suit different training and teaching contexts.

14 Follow up tasks

As a follow-up to the workshop, we encourage the group to carry out an optional additional task. Here are two examples:

Follow up task 1: A language audit of information given to students and staff which may cause potential misunderstandings
To introduce the task, we highlight the point that, despite good intentions, we often make assumptions that what is open and friendly will also be more readily understood. In fact, use of politeness formulae that conform to British cultural expectations as well as the use of 'friendlier' idiomatic English, may in fact make adjusting to the university more challenging. This section is introduced with examples from around the university campus and again could be modified to suit different training contexts. Participants are encouraged to think about how the language they use, both written and spoken, could be made more accessible to students.

For example:

Do you need a hand?	➡	Can I help you?
Please refrain from talking.	➡	No talking, please.
I'm sorry, but would you mind doing that in one of the designated areas?	➡	No smoking here. Thank you.

Follow up task 2: Behavioural conventions task
Draw up a list of guidelines for good practice for your workplace. This time include items that are relevant to both students and staff.

For example, in order to make yourself understood:

Staff:
Reduce the number of idiomatic expressions
(eg, *Do you need a hand?*)

Students:
Use *please* and *thank you* more than you would at home.
Generally, British people seem to like it.

Again, this task has been introduced with examples relevant to a British university campus but could also be modified to suit different contexts.

15 Peer feedback

Many trainers are required to collect standard institutional feedback and evaluation. However, we feel that, in addition to doing this, more qualitative feedback can be extremely useful and in the past we have used the following brief handout:

Please jot down what you felt you got from the session, and anything you didn't like.
Thanks.

On the whole feedback has been positive. For example, one trainee who found the day useful chose to attend the training session to make sense of rapidly changing demographics in her street in North London where she lived. What we can conclude is that many participants at the workshop wished to explore cultural meanings as well as language differences, not only in order to making sense of their workplace, but also in understanding their personal experiences better.

Conclusions

There are, inevitably, tensions between time and resource constraints, on the one hand, and the desire to develop the training day more fully to incorporate awareness-raising alongside culturally competent strategies. However, we conclude that a university or other educational institution which does not attempt to enhance cross-cultural interaction would be inadequate, as increasing linguistic and cultural diversity impacts upon our daily working life. It may well be the case that TEFL trainers, given their awareness of the cultural and linguistic factors that influence communication, are in a unique position to provide sessions enabling staff with non-TEFL training to better understand cross-cultural interactions.

Notes

[1] There are many definitions of culture and it means many different things to different people. Culture is viewed as history, literature, great works of art, architecture and music etc. that a group of people have in common – culture with a capital 'C'. It also refers to customs, traditions, ways of behaving and thinking that people have in common – culture with a small 'c' refers to product (things) and practices.

[2] *Etic*: how an insider might explain an outsider's cultural perspectives. Emic: how an insider might explain their own cultural perspectives. See Holliday, Hyde & Kullman (2006, p.185); Coupland and Jaworski (2009, p.7) and Moran (2001) for a more detailed discussion of emic/etic analysis.

[3] There is overlap with Valdes' (1995) 'cultural bumps' and Bennett's (1998) 'transition shock'.

[4] Essentialism is the tendency to reduce what we think of a person, or a group, to their 'essential' categories. Some common essentialist categories are: young/old, male/female, black/white, middle class/lower class, native speaker/non-native speaker and Eastern/Western. We may then use these categories as an acceptable/legitimate explanation for behaviour that we observe.

[5] 'Border crossing' refers to changes in language use which occur when English associated with one situation or text type (for example, a text message) crosses over into another situation or text type (for example, a formal letter), or vice versa.

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It's a Wired World

A checklist of digital skills for teachers and trainers

By Nik Peachey, UK

It would be hard for anyone involved in education, particularly in ELT to deny the impact that electronic technologies are having on the way a new generation of learners, and indeed teachers, communicate, socialise, entertain themselves, create and of course learn.

But are we as teacher trainers keeping up with these developments ourselves? And more importantly are we ensuring that the courses we deliver not only make best use of new technologies, but enable our trainee teachers to critically assess where and when they can use these technologies to support pedagogical aims?

What digital skills do teachers need?

Recently, I was asked to produce a session for the International Association of Teachers of EFL (IATEFL) Leadership and Management Special Interest Group pre-conference day in Harrogate, UK (2010). I decided for the topic of my presentation to look at what digital skills managers should be ensuring their teachers were developing.

I started this process by brainstorming a tick list of skills that I felt were relevant to the role of a 21st Century teacher. I took into consideration the demands that developments in blended and online learning are likely to make on teachers as more schools take advantage of online and distance markets.

I was pretty surprised to find that, within about fifteen minutes, I'd come up with a list of more than 40 skills. I would like to point out that part of the reason the list is so long is because I have separated the skills of being able to manipulate technology from those of being able to use it to achieve a pedagogical aim. For example; I have separated the skill of being able to create a blog or website from the skill of being able to use a website with students to achieve a pedagogical aim. For me, this is a vitally important point to make. So much teacher training involving technology focuses on the technological side rather than the pedagogical exploitation. I feel this is where learning technology training has failed so many teachers. Teachers often leave training sessions knowing 'how' to create a blog or a wiki, but not really knowing 'why' they should use one rather than the other, or what they can achieve by using them with students.

Here is the list I created:

A Digital Skills Checklist for Teachers

Which of these can you do? Can you…
create and edit digital images
exploit digital images for the creation of web-based learning materials
exploit digital images for classroom use
find and evaluate authentic web based content
exploit web based content for classroom learning
exploit web based content for autonomous student learning
develop interactive online learning activities or tests (drag, drop, gap fill etc)
create a blog or website
exploit blogging to achieve pedagogical aims
create a wiki
exploit a wiki for collaborative learning with students
use synchronous collaborative tools for text constructions and editing
use asynchronous collaborative tools for text constructions and editing
create and edit digital audio